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ABSTRACT

Recent behavioral research has challenged the relationship between speech organization and the communication variables of source credibility and attitude change. Two hundred eighty-seven students comprising six discussion sections of a basic speech course were exposed to videotaped versions of three separate speech conditions: a 30% disorganized speech, a 60% disorganized speech, and an organized speech. Levels of disorganization were achieved by random relocation of sentences within the text. Data revealed that the organized speech produced significantly greater acceptance of the speaker's position and more positive assessment of the speaker's credibility than did either disorganized version. Credibility ratings did not significantly differ between 30% and 60% disorganization levels, nor was persuasive ability perceptibly different in either case. Speaker character was also assessed as higher when an organized version was given. While speaker authority was viewed as stronger when an organized speech was presented than when a 30% disorganized speech was given, no significant difference was noted in assessment of authority between organized and 60% disorganized presentations. (KS)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF LISTENER PERCEPTION OF DEGREES OF SPEECH DISORGANIZATION AND THE EFFECTS ON ATTITUDE CHANGE AND SOURCE CREDIBILITY

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Who can challenge the valuable relationships between speech organization and the communication variables of source credibility and attitude change? Several recent behavioral researchers have and with some surprising results. Four studies explored potential relationships between speech organization and attitude change. Smith in 1951 found no effect on persuasiveness when a single main division of a speech was moved from its normal sequence, though movement of two main divisions significantly reduced persuasion, and complete randomization of the main divisions produced a negative effect.[1] Baker reported that "perceived speaker disorganization cues did not significantly or differentially affect audience attitude change."[2] Thompson concluded in 1960 that no significant differences in attitude change resulted from disorganization.[3] In disagreement with both Baker and Thompson, McCroskey and Mehrley found: "the presence of either serious disorganization or extensive non-fluencies was sufficient to significantly reduce the amount of attitude change produced by a speaker. . . ."[4]

Other studies have explored the relationship between message organization and speaker credibility. Baker disclosed that "perceived

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speaker disorganization cues did not significantly reduce the credibility of the speaker."[5] In a later study, Thompson examined credibility by introducing a question about the speaker's information level. He found that the audience's opinion of the speaker's information level did not alter with changes in the message structure.[6] Two studies that later used Thompson's stimulus speech found opposite results. One study by Sharp and McClung found "students exposed to a disorganized speech thought less of the speaker after hearing his talk than before he spoke."[7] In the other study, McCroskey and Mehrley found that the organization of a message had no significant influence on the character and dynamism dimensions of credibility, though it did have a significant influence on the authority dimension.[8] None of the studies cited created percentage levels of unstructuring and, therefore, did not measure the effect of different percentage levels of unstructuring on attitude change and source credibility.

Researchers have found it necessary to question whether audience members can perceive message disorganization. Three studies contain the previous findings. Smith concluded from the use of a Woodward shift-of-opinion ballot that "listners can tell if a speech is well organized. . . ."[9] Baker approached the question by using a seven-interval semantic differential scale which contained "organized" and "disorganized" as the paired adjectives for evaluating whether the manipulated speaker disorganization cues were perceived by audience

members. Baker states: "the results suggest that the subjects did actually perceive the manipulated disorganizational cues. . . "[10] Finally, Thompson used a question asking whether the speech was (1) highly organized, (2) adequately organized, (3) inadequately organized, or (4) poorly organized. Thompson found that "listeners appear to recognize an unstructured speech as unstructured. . . ."[11] Though the findings from all three studies suggest that audience members can perceive message organization, the findings provide no indication of the degree of disorganization that must exist before the audience recognizes disorganization.

After considering the speech alterations employed by previous researchers who added or deleted rhetorical elements, the decision was made in the present study to narrow the definition of speech disorganization to mean the random rearrangement of a speech without additions or deletions to the original organized speech.[12] Studies by Thompson, Sharp and McClung, and Darnell[13] used various unstructuring procedures, but with the exception of Darnell, none involved the entire speech in the unstructuring. Thompson and Sharp and McClung randomized only within main points or within the three main divisions. Both differ from the present study because neither considered the degree to which the altered speech was unstructured. Darnell considered degree of unstructuring and involved an entire printed message, but unlike the present study did not use random unstructuring.

Only Smith worked from a single recorded presentation by editing the master recording into different experimental conditions. His structural alterations involved the order of the three main divisions in each speech that he employed.[14] Smith recorded his message on a phonograph record and moved the needle to transpose the introduction, body, and conclusion as entire units.

The Problem

The studies of speech organization that were surveyed used either printed presentations, disc recordings, audio tapes, or video tapes. These differences in media of presentation warrant concern about comparability of results from these studies. In the recordings, both audio and video, all but one study used a single speaker who recorded several successive presentations, each from a different manuscript version of a speech. These successive presentations may have endangered the findings by introducing an intervening variable, namely differences in speaker vocal and physical delivery from one recorded presentation to the next. Only Smith attempted to work from a single recorded presentation by editing the master recording into different experimental conditions of disorganization. But his structural alterations were limited to transpositions of the three main divisions of each speech.[15] Smaller message units, such as sentences, could provide more opportunities

for rearrangement and a better control of degree of disorganization. Most earlier studies used extremes of organization and disorganization. What influence would lesser degrees of disorganization have? In other instances the researchers chose to add or delete rhetorical elements. Might not these additions or deletions have an impact on listeners irrespective of message organization? Often the speeches used in previous studies were short in duration possibly allowing listeners to reconstruct what they observed and become less sensitive to message disorganization.

The present study incorporates a design which should reduce or eliminate these criticisms of media of presentation, danger of differences in speaker vocal and physical delivery, size of message units, degree of disorganization, additions or deletions from the message, and sufficiency of message duration. Thus a beginning can be made in determining the degree of disorganization necessary before an audience becomes aware of disorientation. Similarly, knowledge may be furthered concerning the influence of degree of message disorganization on speaker credibility and on acceptance of the speaker's position.

Hypotheses

Three hypotheses were tested, each probing the impact of degree of message disorganization on a different dependent variable.

Previous findings by Smith, Baker, and Thompson[16] clearly suggest that audience members will perceive message disorganization, at least when extensive. Therefore, we would expect not only a critical reaction to a substantially disorganized speech but a decreasing critical reaction when that disorganization is reduced. A derivative research hypothesis can be stated:

(1) Audience members will assign higher ratings of organization to an organized argumentative speech than to 30% and 60% disorganized versions of the same message.

Earlier findings by McCroskey and Mehrley[17] suggest that message disorganization will reduce attitude change. Consistent with this suggestion but imposing variation in degree of disorganization, a second research hypothesis can be derived to probe the impact of message disorganization on attitude change.

(2) Progressively more acceptance of a speaker's position will result when audience members hear an organized speech than when they hear 30% and 60% disorganized versions of the same message.

A third research hypothesis is spawned from the findings by Sharp and McClung and by McCroskey and Mehrley[18] that message disorganization has at least some negative impact on speaker credibility.

(3) A source who has presented an organized argumentative speech will be perceived as more credible than a source who has presented either a 30% or a 60% disorganized version of the same message.

Procedure

Two-hundred and eighty-seven students comprising six discussion sections of the basic speech course served as audience members for this study. They participated prior to receiving course instruction in speech organization.

In preparing the stimulus message for this study, initial attitudes toward sixteen different attitude statements (potential thesis statements) were surveyed by means of a five stage Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The attitude statement that best elicited a normal distribution of responses on the attitude scale was chosen.

The chosen attitude statement was used as the thesis in developing an argumentative speech. The prepared presentation was timed at eight minutes and fifty-two seconds, sufficient duration to reduce the chance that a listener could reorganize the message from memory and, therefore, not be influenced by any unstructuring created for the experimental conditions. Five speech faculty members independently evaluated the speech as well organized.

Three versions of the speech were used in the study, the original organized version and two disorganized versions. The two disorganized versions created two separate conditions: (1) a 30% disorganized speech, and (2) a 60% disorganized speech. These two levels of disorganization were achieved by relocation of sentences within the entire speech.

In creating the disorganized versions of the speech, randomization procedures were used. Each sentence in the organized speech was assigned a number. A random drawing of these numbers determined each condition. The first drawing determined the 30% of the sentences that would be relocated for the first disorganized version of the speech. These 30% were then used for a separate random drawing to determine the new location for each sentence. No sentence in this second drawing was allowed to be assigned its original location. For the 60% disorganized version, an additional 30% of the sentences were drawn and reassigned using the randomization procedure.

A professional speaker from the speech faculty was selected for videotaping. He delivered the organized version of the speech.

Videotape editing procedures were used to create the 30% and 60% disorganized versions of the speech dictated by the randomization procedure. At the time of the original videotaping, three separate videotapes were made at once. Three cameras were used. One videotape resulted from a mixed selection from the three cameras. Each of the other videotapes was obtained from the signal of only one camera, one tape from the camera to the left of center, and one tape from the camera to the right of center. The mixed selection videotape recording served as the master within which sentences were relocated. The other tapes were used during the editing procedure when a speaker change in physical position would otherwise be distorted through editing use of the master alone. The final edited versions were compared and con-

trasted with the original master tape by three professional television directors. These directors agreed that the editing was professional and that the editing did not in itself constitute a distraction.

The speech conditions employed in this study contained strengths over conditions used by previous researchers. One presentation by the speaker was used, not several. Material was used for relocation other than only paragraphs or other main speech parts. The speaker was both audible and visible to the audience under each condition, because a videotaped presentation was used.

The six discussion sections of the basic course were randomly combined into three groups. Group number one viewed the organized speech, group number two the 30% disorganized speech, and group number three the 60% disorganized speech. Following each viewing, the students filled out a questionnaire.

The questionnaire contained three measuring instruments. A nine space scale extending from "well organized" to "poorly organized" was employed for evaluation of the speech. Six semantic differential scales were used for assessment of the speaker's credibility. These were the six scales originally developed by James McCroskey to measure the authority and character dimensions of credibility.[19] Finally, one question employed a nine space scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" to evaluate the position advocated by the speaker.

Results

Highly significant differences favoring the organized presentation were found in evaluations of organization when the organized speech was compared with either the 30% disorganized version or the 60% disorganized version.[20] In addition, comparison of the 30% disorganized version with the 60% disorganized version revealed a significant difference favoring the 30% version. Table 1 shows the comparisons of audience evaluations of speaker message organization under the conditions of 0%, 30%, and 60% disorganization.

The organized speech produced significantly greater acceptance of the speaker's position than did either of the disorganized versions. Neither of the disorganized versions of the speech was significantly more persuasive than the other in the direction advocated by the speaker. Attitudinal comparisons are shown in Table 2.

The organized speech caused a significantly more positive assessment of the speaker's credibility than did either of the disorganized versions. Yet, credibility ratings produced by the 30% disorganized version of the speech were not significantly different from the ratings produced by the 60% disorganized version. The results varied when responses of the three research groups were compared on the separate dimensions of credibility, character and authority. Group comparisons of the ratings revealed

TABLE 1
COMPARISONS OF AUDIENCE EVALUATIONS OF SPEAKER MESSAGE ORGANIZATION UNDER CONDITIONS OF 0%, 30%, and 60% DISORGANIZATION

Conditions of Message Disorganization Compared	n	Mean	$\bar{X}-\bar{Y}$	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t
Zero Percent	97	2.753		1.732	.176	
Thirty Percent	95	5.758		2.868	.294	
			-3.01			8.60**
Zero Percent	97	2.753		1.732	.176	
Sixty Percent	95	6.522		2.662	.278	
			-3.77			11.42**
Thirty Percent	95	5.758		2.868	.294	
Sixty Percent	95	6.522		2.662	.278	
			-.76			1.85*

*p = <.05; one-tailed test.
**p = <.01; one-tailed test.

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF AUDIENCE ATTITUDES RESULTING FROM EXPOSURE TO A SPEAKER'S MESSAGE UNDER CONDITIONS OF 0%, 30%, and 60% DISORGANIZATION

Conditions of Message Disorganization Compared	n	Mean	$\bar{X}-\bar{Y}$	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t
Zero Percent	97	2.815		1.927	.201	
Thirty Percent	95	3.934		2.624	.275	
			-1.12			3.20**
Zero Percent	97	2.815		1.927	.201	
Sixty Percent	95	3.925		2.651	.275	
			-1.11			3.17**
Thirty Percent	95	3.934		2.624	.275	
Sixty Percent	95	3.925		2.651	.275	
			+ .01			.03

*p = <.05; one-tailed test.
**p = <.01; one-tailed test.

that the organized speech produced a significantly higher evaluation of the speaker's character than either the 30% or 60% disorganized versions. The speaker's character was not viewed as significantly different when results from presentations of the two disorganized versions of the speech were compared. Finally, group comparisons on the authority dimension revealed discrepant results. The speaker was viewed as significantly more authoritative when he delivered the organized speech than when he delivered the 30% disorganized version; however, he was not viewed as significantly more authoritative when his organized presentation was compared with his 60% disorganized presentation. Comparison of the two disorganized versions displayed no significant difference in evaluation of speaker authority. Table 3 shows the comparative influence on speaker credibility of the three conditions of message disorganization.

Discussion

These audience members without special training in speech organization were able to distinguish between a speech that was well organized and versions of that speech that had 30% and 60% of the sentences randomly relocated. With this finding, there is as yet no basis for specifying the minimal percentage of relocated sentences (or randomization) that would cause audience criticism of speech organization.

The importance of speech organization was demonstrated by more than audience ability to perceive its presence or partial

TABLE 3
COMPARISONS OF SPEAKER CREDIBILITY SCORES RESULTING FROM AUDIENCE EXPOSURE TO A SPEAKER'S MESSAGE UNDER CONDITIONS OF 0%, 30%, AND 60% DISORGANIZATION

Dimensions of Credibility	Conditions of Message Disorganization Compared	n	Mean	$\bar{X}-\bar{Y}$	t
Character and Authority Combined	Zero Percent	97	22.80		
	Thirty Percent	95	25.29	-2.49	2.17*
	Zero Percent	97	22.80		
	Sixty Percent	95	25.39	-2.59	2.32*
	Thirty Percent	95	25.29		
	Sixty Percent	95	25.39	- .10	.08
Character	Zero Percent	97	12.28		
	Thirty Percent	95	13.51	-1.23	1.93*
	Zero Percent	97	12.28		
	Sixty Percent	95	13.87	-1.59	2.65**
	Thirty Percent	95	13.51		
	Sixty Percent	95	13.87	- .36	.58
Authority	Zero Percent	97	10.53		
	Thirty Percent	95	11.79	-1.26	1.75*
	Zero Percent	97	10.53		
	Sixty Percent	95	11.52	- .99	1.36
	Thirty Percent	95	11.79		
	Sixty Percent	95	11.52	+ .27	.34

*p = <.05; one-tailed test.
**p = <.01; one-tailed test.

absence. As in previous studies, a direct relationship was found between the presence or absence of satisfactory speech organization and audience acceptance of the position advocated by the speaker. In the present study, 30% message disorganization was enough to reduce persuasion significantly compared with the effects of the organized message. Organization appears clearly related to persuasiveness.

Previous studies have found a relationship between speech organization (or disorganization) and speaker credibility. The present study found significantly higher speaker credibility resulting from the organized speech compared with the two versions containing 30% and 60% of the sentences randomly relocated. But of previous studies, only McCroskey and Mehrley examined the influence on the different dimensions of credibility.[21] The present study examined only two of those dimensions, yet found results that largely contradict those reported by McCroskey and Mehrley. The two earlier researchers found no significant influence of message organization versus disorganization on the character dimension. The present study revealed a significant influence on the character dimension. McCroskey and Mehrley reported that organization significantly influenced the authority dimension; whereas, the present study revealed significant influence only when the effects of the organized speech were compared with those of the 30% disorganized version, but not when compared with the 60% disorganized version. Still the evaluation of the authority dimension comparing the 30% and the 60%

versions of the speech revealed no significant difference. There are no evident clues in the present study to explain why 30% disorganization significantly reduced the authority of the speaker but 60% disorganization did not. Though a definite relationship seems to exist between speech organization and credibility, more research is necessary to determine the precise nature of the relationship to the dimensions of speaker credibility.

Now the search goes on for a minimal level of disorganization that an audience can identify and that will influence credibility and attitude change. Whatever that minimal level may be, it is probably somewhere between a well organized speech and 30% disorganization.

FOOTNOTES

Mr. Jones is an Assistant Professor and Mr. Serlovsky is a former Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Speech and Theatre, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle.

[1]Raymond G. Smith, "An Experimental Study of the Effects of Speech Organization upon Attitudes of College Students," SM, 18 (1951), 292-301.

[2]Eldon E. Baker, "Immediate Effects of Perceived Speaker Disorganization on Speaker Credibility and Audience Attitude Change in Persuasive Speaking," Western Speech, 29 (1965), 148-61.

[3]Ernest Thompson, "An Experimental Investigation of the Relative Effectiveness of Organizational Structure in Oral Communication," Southern Speech Journal, 26 (1960), 59-69.

[4]James C. McCroskey and R. Samuel Mehrley, "The Effects of Disorganization and Nonfluency on Attitude Change and Source Credibility," SM, 36 (1969), 13-21.

[5]Baker, Ibid.

[6]Ernest Thompson, "Some Effects of Message Structure on Listeners' Comprehension," SM, 34 (1967), 51-57.

[7]Harry Sharp, Jr. and Thomas McClung, "Effects of Organization on the Speaker's Ethos," SM, 33 (1966), 182-83.

[8]McCroskey and Mehrley, p. 21.

[9]Smith, p. 300.

[10]Baker, p. 159.

[11]Thompson, "Some Effects of Message Structure on Listeners' Comprehension," p. 56.

[12]Several previous studies added cues or deleted information. See the following studies: Baker, Ibid.; John Waite Bowers, "Language Intensity, Social Introversion, and Attitude Change," SM, 30 (1963), 345-52; Frederick H. Turner, Jr., "The Effects of Speech Summaries on Audience Comprehension," Central States Speech Journal, 21 (1970), 24-29; James F. Vickrey, Jr., "An Experimental Investigation of the

FOOTNOTES, continued. . .

Effects of 'Previews' and 'Reviews' on Retention of Orally Presented Information," Southern Speech Journal, 36 (1971), 209-19; and John P. Parker, "Some Organizational Variables and Their Effects Upon Comprehension," Journal of Communication, 12 (1962), 27-32.

[13]Thompson, "An Experimental Investigation of the Relative Effectiveness of Organizational Structure in Oral Communication," and "Some Effects of Message Structure on Listeners' Comprehension"; Sharp and McClung, Ibid.; and Donald K. Darnell, "The Relation Between Sentence Order and Comprehension," SM, 30 (1963), 97-100.

[14]Smith, p. 294.

[15]Smith, Ibid.

[16]Smith, Ibid.; Baker, Ibid.; and Thompson, Ibid.

[17]McCroskey and Mehrley, Ibid.

[18]Sharp and McClung, Ibid. and McCroskey and Mehrley, Ibid.

[19]James C. McCroskey, "Scales for the Measurement of Ethos," SM, 33 (1966), 65-72.

[20]The criterion for statistical significance was set at .05 for all tests.

[21]McCroskey and Mehrley, Ibid.